



The Yoruba are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria today. They are also considered to have a high level of cultural achievement. In his book, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, William Bascom attempts to give the reader insight into the complexity of this culture by giving an account of the traditional aspects of Yoruba culture, while also giving some indications of the changes within as western modernization has come to Nigeria.

Bascom did the bulk of his fieldwork between 1937-1938, but returned to the country in during the fifties and sixties. While he does not describe how he gathered his information, it can be assumed that he spent time observing and talking to informants in order to get a clearer picture of Yoruba life. There are a few points that he wants to make clear at the beginning of the ethnography. He says that Yoruba culture is so complex that he has had to provide very brief descriptions of different activities and that other books should be consulted in order to learn more about a specific idea. Because the Yoruba are such a large cultural population, there is also much variation between the characteristics of local villages. Bascom's main focus lies in the city of Ife because that is where he spent the most time doing research and also because it is a large city that is important in the culture. Thirdly, he states that change has come to the traditional way of life and that he tried to balance between describing daily life and how modernization has brought these changes.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide a brief introduction to the history and geography of the Yoruba people. They are one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria and are considered to be one of the most highly advanced civilizations in West Africa. For many years, the Yoruba comprised the educated elite in Nigeria, providing teachers and white-collar workers. After Nigeria's independence, they became a minority group, but still hold important political power. As with any large ethnic group, there are many subgroups of Yoruba. Around half of all Yoruba lived in

cities in 1953; however, many of them would continue to commute to their farms, particularly during growing and harvesting season. These each have unique attributes, but the major parts of their culture remain the same. The book also gives an overview of the history of the Yoruba; however, this is not the main focus of the ethnography.

In chapter 3, the basics of the Yoruba economic system is explained. Their economy is based on subsistence farming, crafts, and trade. While some hunting and gathering is done, the majority of the Yoruba diet relies on starches such as yams, cassava, and plantains. Along with fruits and vegetables, these are grown on small farms. For the most part, farming is done by the men, although women may help them in some regions. Usually, the farmer works alone, but sometimes unmarried sons will work also. When farmers have small plots close together, they will sometimes have a labor exchange, in which they spend an equal amount of time working on each other's land. If there is a lot of work to be done, a working bee may be called, in which a man invites friends and relatives to help him with a specific task. He provides food and drink and those who helped him have the right to call on him if they need aid. The Yoruba practice a form of collective land ownership, in which farm land is owned by the clan. It is assigned based on individual need and only the crops grown on it belong to the individual farmer. The main cash crop for the Yoruba is cocoa, which led to an increased need for imported food.

There is also much specialization. Activities such as blacksmithing, weaving, leatherworking, and farming are all professions that one is specifically trained for. Each individual has to rely on the society as a whole in order to meet all of their needs because they are not self-sufficient. Markets are an important part of daily life because it is here that people can get all of the goods they need. As occurs in the Zapotec communities, women are the main traders and sellers in the marketplace, with the exception of the butchers. One difference between

Zapotec women in the marketplace and Yoruba women is that the Yoruba women can either sell items that their husbands have grown or made or they can be commissioned traders dealing with a particular business. Thus, many of them consider themselves to be professional traders. However, most Zapotec women still consider being a housewife to be their main occupation; selling in the marketplace is a secondary activity to supplement their family incomes. Women in both groups are the primary traders in marketplaces, but they do so for different reasons. The Yoruba culture is unique in that its economic system used both money and credit, instead of just relying on bartering. They used cowry shells as the basis of trade and also had an institution called the *esusu*. This was a group in which all members contributed a set amount of money at set intervals and got back the same amount. This provided a way for a person to get a larger amount of money at one time without having to pay interest on it.

Chapter 4 describes the basics of the traditional government and legal system. While these have obviously changed during more modern times, it is still important to know the political structure of the society. The top political leader was the *oni*, or king. He lived a very secluded life in the palace in Ife and was considered to be divine. The *oni* was chosen from the royal patrilineal clan and was hereditary, in that the successor had to be chosen from among members of the specific royal clan. There are also both town and palace chiefs. The town chiefs are responsible for representing the interests of the townspeople at the palace. The palace chiefs represented the interests of the *oni* when dealing with people from the outlying towns. This system is quite complicated, but the author did not go into great detail in describing the specific roles of each group.

Similarly, the legal system was made up of a series of increasingly important courts at which arguments could be decided. If a dispute could not be settled among a specific clan or if it

included people from different clans, the case would be referred to a ward chief. If the problem was still not solved, the case could go on to the palace chiefs or the town chiefs. Their decision was then approved by the *Oni*. However, most disputes were solved more informally with both sides stating their case and the people around them trying to come up with a fair verdict.

Traditionally, behavior was largely regulated by informal laws of long standing. After the British arrived, criminal law was modified to fit British standards, but civil law is still largely based on Yoruba values.

In chapter 5, the social structure of the Yoruba is discussed. The Yoruba classify themselves using the patrilineal clan, in which people are identified with the family of their fathers. A person is prevented from marrying a member of his own clan, regardless of the degree of relatedness. It is interesting to note that beyond the fourth generation, relatives are simply known as ancestors whose specific names are no longer remembered. Generally, the Yoruba practiced patrilocal residence, in which the bride moved into the compound of her husband's father. However, matrilocal residence occasionally occurred when a poor man married a woman from a wealthy family, but this did not occur often. The clan is a corporate group, so it owns the land it lives and farms on and is a self-perpetuating group. The clan will live close together in compounds led by the *Bale*, who is the oldest male of the clan. This term can also be used to refer to the husband of a household. He is responsible dealing out justice and for assigning living quarters and farm land for members of his clan. The women have a corresponding authority figure, the *Iyale*, who is the most senior wife who is responsible for settling quarrels between wives and for preparing food for feasts. These figures appear to be similar to *Dadi* and *Dada* from the film *Dadi's Family*.

The clan is much more important than the immediate family, which is made of a man, his wives, and their children. Informants said that this is partially due to the fact that the immediate family can be transient, while the blood relatives in the clan are permanent. Because the Yoruba are polygynous, the sub-family consisting of a wife and her children is an important aspect of family life. This group has a room to themselves and also shares possessions together. While children will play together when young, they often drift apart as they get older and property rights become more important to them.

Apart from kinship, there are a couple of other institutions that are important in the social structure of the Yoruba. Friends are very important to the Yoruba and best friends are found based on the experience of finding out who can be trusted and who provides helpful advice. Clubs also exist as a way of forming social relationships. The ethnography describes a typical case in which a club might be formed. A child would invite his friends and peers over for a meal and this may be reciprocated by them. If the meetings continue, the group will ask an elder man and women to be advisors to the club. The club will then continue to meet as the children grow older and it forms a useful group of people that someone can rely on for help. The formation of recognized, formal ties between unrelated individuals is a recurring theme in many cultures. For example, the Zapotecs have the compadre system, which is reaffirmed throughout their lifetimes at various rites of passage and provides a relationship that can be called upon during hard times. The Netsilik also have many formalized relationships, such as the seal-sharing partnership, song partnership, and wife-sharing partnership. By having these relationships, cultures are able to establish close ties with non-relatives and extend their circle of trust, which can be very important in a dangerous world.

Chapter 6 goes through the important events of a person's life in Yoruba culture, dealing mainly with childhood, marriage, and death. After birth, there is a naming ceremony and a feast given in the child's honor. This usually occurs about a week after birth. A bowl of water is placed in front of the mother and child and the various members of the extended family take turns coming up and placing some money in the bowl, while suggesting a name for the child. Thus, a child can have many different names, but eventually one becomes most popular and the child is just called by that name. Afterwards, a feast is held and the child's hair is cut. Small children usually play games in which they imitate the work that their parents do. Bascom gives some examples of girls imitating their father's job as an interpreter. This is very similar to what ✓ Yanomamo children do. Chagnon writes about Ariwari, a child who copies his father in activities such as building a temporary campsite. In both cultures, the children watch what their parents do and try to copy it on a smaller scale. An important aspect of Yanomamo children's imitation of adults is in demonstrating their "fierceness." This is done by fighting with the other children and receiving approval after throwing a temper tantrum. While this was not discussed directly in the Yoruba book, I do not think that it would occur in the Yoruba culture because they do not seem to have the same emphasis on "fierceness" that the Yanomamo do. Around age five or six, the children start to help their parents with actual work, to the extent that they are able to do so. This is encouraged as long as the children are not destructive. As with the Yanomamo, the girls tend to have more responsibilities at an earlier age. The ethnography states that economic and psychological independence are stressed, but that social independence is not. The child learns to make decisions and watch out for himself, but also still has to respect kinship bonds.

The Yoruba are a polygynous society. According to the ethnography, both men and women prefer this type of marriage for many reasons. Plural wives give a man prestige because

they indicate wealth and because they insure that he will have a lot of children. Like many other societies, being able to provide for multiple wives means that a man is sufficiently wealthy and that his has been successful in life. Women are satisfied by polygyny because household duties are shared and because their social status is dependent on that of their husbands. The purposes and benefits of polygyny in this society appear to be similar to those of the Mende society. Girls usually get married around age twenty , while men get married later because they have to save up to pay brideprice. A betrothal is carried out by an intermediary who negotiates on behalf of the man. The initial marriage proposal is usually not accepted because the girl's parents will take the time to see what the character of their future son-in-law is like. If they approve, they consult a diviner and if this is successful, the proposal will finally be accepted. There are three separate brideprices that the groom must pay, which are known as "becoming in-laws", "love money", and "wife money." The future son-in-law is also obligated to help out the bride's father when he needs it. The honor-shame complex also plays a role, as the bride is expected to prove her virginity on her wedding night. There will be feasting if she does; if she does not, rude comments are made about her. The Zapotecs also place importance on the role of females holding the family honor and also expect virginity to be proven. The Yoruba practice the levirate, in which wives marry their dead husband's younger brother. Because of these many gifts, a man must be sufficiently wealthy before he will be able to afford to have a wife, let alone multiple ones. The trait of a man being older before he first marries and especially having multiple wives, is one that is also followed in the Yanomamo and Tiwi cultures. ✓

While young children do not have funerals, most other people have a funeral or feast in their honor. There are a number of rituals that must be followed to prevent someone else from the same clan from dying. These include washing the body at dark so its shadow cannot be seen



and not allowing the body to fall to the ground. The burial takes place with a ceremonial meal and then the grave is filled in. Funerals for women had an additional step in which the co-wives of the deceased would have a meal together and then beat drums and dance. Yoruba funerals tended to be joyous occasions when the deceased was elderly because they believed that the person had had a long, good life with lots of children and that these facts should be celebrated.

In chapters 7 and 8, the ethnography describes the main aspects of Yoruba religious practices—rebirth, the afterworld, and the deities. The Yoruba believe that each person has multiple souls. The most important one is the ancestral guardian soul, which is associated with the head and reincarnation. The second one is the breath, which is what gives life. The third one is the shadow, which has no real function. Individuals are usually reborn into the same clan and because of this ancestors are given special reverence. The Netsilik also had multiple souls and taboos that must be followed in order for the spirits to be peaceful. In this way, ancestors had to be appeased in order for them to not cause mischief among the living. During a ceremony known as “feeding the head,” the ancestor soul is fed. All individuals who have this same soul must follow this practice. After death, the three souls go to heaven where the guardian soul gives an accounting of good and bad deeds to Olorun, the sky god. If the person was good, he is set to the “good heaven,” but if he was bad, he is sent to “bad heaven.” This is similar to the Yanomamo idea that a person has to account for himself to Wadawadariwa and that depending on his answer, may be sent to the good or bad “heaven.” This is also similar to many of the mainstream religions. For the Yoruba, in the good heaven, people continue their lives as they lived them on Earth. In the bad heaven, the people have to walk in the midday sun on broken potshards. Those sent to the bad heaven can also never be restored through reincarnation. The Yoruba also have

many deities, but each person picks a major deity who can help them. Usually, this deity is the same as that of his father, but the mother's deity may also be worshiped.

Chapter 9 gives examples of the various esthetics of the Yoruba. While it would take too much time to explain all of these in detail, a brief description of each follows. At gatherings, folktales and songs may be performed. Riddles are also used to sharpen the mind and to teach children. Although its use has decreased in modern times, facial and body scarification was used as a symbol of beauty and to indicate clan membership. In contrast to some other groups, men are the tailors and dressmakers, while women are the potters. The blacksmiths and woodcarvers are also men.

After reading this ethnography, it was obvious that Bascom has a great deal of respect for and interest in the Yoruba culture. This was evident in the way he wrote the book. The ethnography attempted to give the reader an idea of the main characteristics of the culture of the Yoruba people. I believe that he was successful in this basic aim, but that the overall scope of the book remained too broad. However, in his introduction, he did state that because the Yoruba culture is so large and complex, he would necessarily have to an overview because otherwise there would be too much information.

It seems to me that the book would have been more interesting if there were more anecdotes from his encounters with the Yoruba. It also would have helped if he had chosen to write about one specific village or region. That said, I think he did a good job in sharing the information and he also provided an extensive list of additional readings that could clear up some of the confusing points or provide additional insight into a particular cultural practice. Another issue with the ethnography is that not much data was included. This made it hard to know how widespread a particular practice was. The work he included was probably sufficient for this type

of introduction to a culture, but it was not as in-depth as the data from some of the other ethnographies we read this semester.

Reading this book was worthwhile because I did learn a lot more about the Yorubas than I had known before. While I know that they were a large ethnic group in Nigeria and I had heard of their artwork before, I was not aware of the overall complexity of their society. While it is stereotypical, it seems like mainstream society portrays African societies as being primitive, which is simply not true. An interesting point that Bascom brought up was that Americans tend to overestimate the effects of European colonization and economic development. Perhaps the difference is that in the cases Bascom specified, the Yoruba were successfully integrated into the European system by becoming educated workers instead of remaining on the fringes of the new society. I think that it would have been interesting to read more about the specific changes that were brought to the Yoruba. Other ethnographies have indicated that contact with the western world has brought drastic changes to societies, but for the Yorubas, it doesn't seem to have been a big deal. That is the impression that stayed with me after reading this book—that the Yoruba culture continues to flourish in spite of outside influence. Out of the cultures we looked at this semester, it seems that the Yoruba are most similar to the Zapotec in terms of their involvement in and adaptations to colonization and the importance of markets and specialization in daily life.

In conclusion, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* gave a very good overview of the culture and its main practices. The Yoruba are an old and complex society that is considered to have one of the highest levels of cultural achievement in sub-Saharan Africa. They are both an urban society and one that relies on small-scale family farming. They are very economically integrated, with each person relying on the specialization of others in order to get the things he needs. There was a complex system of kings and chiefs that provided leadership, along with a

legal system that allowed disputes to be worked out fairly. The clan was considered to be the most important social unit, but extended polygynous families were also vital. A man's status was increased by the number of wives he had because there was a direct correlation between being wealthy and having enough money to be able to afford the bride price. Their religious beliefs included the idea that a person had multiple souls and could be reincarnated. Finally, the Yoruba are quite well known for their complex art work. All of these factors make them an interesting society to study and Bascom's book made this very clear.